

WAR AND SOCIETY

Proposal to the John B. Hurford '60 Center for the Arts and Humanities for a Faculty Seminar, AY 2018-19

Paul Jakov Smith,
History and East Asian Languages and Cultures
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RATIONALE

Courtiers in the period of Chinese history that I study, conventionally known as the Song Dynasty (960-1279), prided themselves on the “glorification of civil culture over military affairs,” the triumph of the newly-risen literati-bureaucrats over the once-dominant military class, and a pacifist foreign policy that depended on Chinese wealth and the belief in cultural exceptionalism to secure a dependable peace. Yet their self-image was more aspiration than reality. For in truth, the Song polity was enmeshed in wars – expansionist as well as defensive wars – for most of its three-century history. These wars not only drained the vibrant commercial economy, fractured the political elite, and exacerbated the trend towards authoritarian rule, but they also culminated in the massive loss of territory to the Jurchen in 1127 and the eradication of the entire dynasty by the Mongols in 1279. There were always some among the political class who insisted that war and its ramifications required greater literati attention, but more often than not they were dismissed as alarmists or silenced by the censorial apparatus of the Song state. Alarmist or no, the critics often turned out to be right, as recriminations about the failure of the literati to become better informed about war that followed every major defeat attested.

It would be folly to suggest that our age mirrors the Song, or that we as the “literati” of the day are as sequestered from reality as our Song forbears. To the contrary, we are bombarded daily with evidence that the world we live in is engulfed in wars now, or threatened by war in the future. And as members of an institution founded by and dedicated to the values of the Quakers, we are made mindful of war through our dedication to peace. But given just how thoroughly war has come to shape our world, this may be a propitious time to think more explicitly about the nature of war, its impact on society, and the always fraught balance between war and peace. This proposal for a Hurford Center for the Arts and Humanities Faculty Seminar on “War and Society” is offered as a step in that direction.

OUTLINE

There is almost no aspect of the human condition that has not been affected by war, or any aspect of war that has not been reflected in the written and visual records of the present and the past. Thus no selection of discussion themes and illustrative materials can hope to be comprehensive. But by spanning disciplines and comparing cultures, we can at least explore some reasons for the ubiquity of war, and understand why war has been and continues to be celebrated as well as condemned. For the first semester of our seminar, I will propose an initial series of themes and readings to be improved upon and augmented by our participants, including

our Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow. We will devote the second semester to research, readings, and case studies selected by our participants, with the possibility of a larger public event.

PROVISIONAL FIRST SEMESTER THEMES

We will begin the first semester with broad overviews, before turning to more specific themes. Although both themes and readings will ultimately be shaped by the interests of our participants, the first semester of seven sessions might look as follows.

Session One. War and Society: A Sociological Overview.

Main reading: Miguel A. Centano and Elaine Enriquez, *War & Society* (Polity Press, 2016). A thoughtful and thoroughly researched overview of war's paradox as destroyer of bodies and communities that has at the same time engendered many of our strongest human bonds and fundamental institutions. Although focused largely on the Western world the book raises issues applicable to all societies. The authors use "the historical comparative method to glean sociological insights about the nature of warfare and how it reflects and shapes social dynamics and institutions," and provide an excellent bibliography.

Session Two. War, Technology, and State Building in Historical Perspective.

Main reading: Either William McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (University of Chicago, 1984). A classic survey of the intersection of war, the rise of the market economy, technology, and the state from "the (11th-century) era of Chinese predominance" through the last decade of the Cold War. In McNeill's view, it was only recently that global political institutions have become able to corral and control the impetuous bellicosity produced by "the unseen hand of the market," an optimism that may now be tested by bellicosity generated by other sources.

Or:

Jeremy Black, *Why Wars Happen* (New York University, 1998). Black's timeframe, 1450 to the 1990s, is somewhat narrower than McNeill's, but his close focus on wars across cultures, wars within cultures, and civil wars could be quite helpful to us. I haven't yet read Black's book, but it looks quite good.

Session Three. Can Wars be Just?

Main reading: Gregory M. Reichberg and Henrik Begby, *The Ethics of War: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. This 700-page anthology surveys writers in support of and opposed to the notion of just wars from Thucydides to Kofi Annan. Because the collection is resolutely Western, we can be selective in our choices in order to make room for non-Western perspectives. I can supply translations of Chinese debates on the question of "wars of necessity" (不得已之戰, *budeyi zhi zhan*) versus "wars of choice" (*deyi zhi zhan*), and our other participants can no doubt provide selections of their own.

Session Four. Literary Representations of the Glory and Pathos of War.

As Centano and Enriquez emphasize, although war in "its essence is brutal, destructive, and chaotic[, yet] war also demands the very best of its participants—heroism, bravery, and inventiveness." This paradox, which lies at the heart of much war literature, is beautifully captured in the medieval Japanese war epic *The Tale of the Heike*. I will propose selections from

Heike, and invite seminar colleagues to provide examples of war literature from their own region of study. If we are joined by someone in visual studies this session could be expanded or doubled to include war and the visual arts.

Session Five. The Horrors of War.

No investigation of war should overlook its brutal, destructive, and inhumane side. Is it possible to make a distinction between brutal but restrained war and outright crimes against humanity, or does war itself inevitably engender such crimes? Is warfare becoming more inhumane as it feeds on the intersection of new technologies and ethnic or religious hatred, or have wars always been intrinsically inhumane? We will need the help of our seminar participants to help refine this question and select our readings.

Session Six. Intractable Wars: Some Case Studies

The Chinese have a saying to the effect that “wars are easy to start but hard to end.” Why is it that some wars resist all efforts at settlement, if not actual peace? Vietnam is one such quagmire, drawing France, the United States, China, the Soviet Union, and the two Vietnams and their neighbors for some four decades, from 1945 through the 1980s. Israel and Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan, and all too many nations of Africa provide more current examples of intractable wars. Our participants will be invited to provide case studies and readings that might help us look for elements common to wars that resist peace.

Session Seven. Civil Society and the Military in America.

Main reading: Jim Mattis and Kori N. Schake, editors, *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of Our Military* (Stanford University, 2016). This collection of essays explores an issue much commented on by recent observers: a growing gap between the experiences of men and women in the military and the broader American public as a whole. The timely essays address such topics as civil-military relations, attitudes towards our current wars and its growing cohort of veterans, and changing views of the military by a millennial generation that has grown up in an age of continuous war. If possible we will seek to enliven this session by inviting current or recent members of the military to participate.

SPRING SEMESTER: POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS AND AN EXHIBITION

During the Fall of 2018 I will offer a seminar for students, “War and Society,” that mirrors the themes and readings described above; this is a topic I have long wanted to explore with students, and whether or not my HCAH proposal is accepted this would be an ideal time to offer the student seminar. Should the proposal be accepted, themes and readings for the Spring Semester will be selected by our participants. Because of the centrality of war to human experience, the issue of war and its impact on society is relevant to virtually every one of our academic departments in all three divisions. Thus I can imagine colleagues from Comparative Literature, Classics, and Religion in the Humanities joining with historians and political scientists or a psychologist in the Social Sciences and an Environmentalist or AI specialist in the Natural Sciences all finding common ground in the discussion of war. As is trumpeted on a daily basis, we are all enmeshed in war, whether locally or as global citizens. So the constituency for this seminar could be quite broad.

An ideal way to link our seminar to the larger public would be through an art exhibition. The current exhibition on “World War I and American Art” at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts demonstrates the power of art as interpreter, critic, and in many cases tribune of war; perhaps we could mount an exhibition that highlighted some of the ambiguities of war.